DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 657 EA 018 164

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TITLE Public Attitudes toward Education Spending: The Role of Attentiveness to Local Schools.
PUB DATE 31 Mar 85
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 31-April 4, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Attitudes; Elementary Secondary Education; *Local Issues; Multivariate Analysis; *Public Opinion; School Community Relationship; *School District Spending; *School Support; Surveys; Tables (Data)
IDENTIFIERS *Illinois

ABSTRACT

This analysis examines the factors associated with a positive attitude toward the funding of local schools. Using data from a 1984 survey of 1,000 Illinois residents, the analysis found that attentiveness to local school issues was the strongest predictor of a positive attitude toward school spending. Suburban residents were less likely to be concerned about the level of school funding than were other Illinois residents, but this may reflect the relatively better funding base for suburban schools. Middle-income respondents in Chicago were significantly more likely to see public schools as underfunded than were other Chicago or Illinois residents, while middle-income residents of downstate areas were the least likely to see their schools as underfunded. The analysis concludes that, given the large impact of attentiveness on spending attitudes, it is important for local school leaders to identify and work with school attentives and that scholars should seek to better understand the sources and patterns of attentiveness to local schools. (Author)

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Public Attitudes toward Education Spending: The role of attentiveness to local schools.

A paper presented to the 1985 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, Illinois.

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March 31, 1985

EA 013 164

ABSTRACT

This analysis examines the factors associated with a positive attitude toward the funding of local schools. Using data from a 1984 survey of 1000 Illinois residents, the analysis found that attentiveness to local school issues was the strongest predictor of a positive attitude toward school spending. Suburban residents were less likely to be concerned about the level of school funding than other Illinois residents, but this may reflect the relatively better funding base for suburban schools. Middle-income respondents in Chicago were significantly more likely to see public schools as underfunded than other Chicago or Illinois residents, while middle-income residents of downstate areas were the least likely to see their schools as underfunded. The analysis concludes that given the large impact of attentiveness on spending attitudes, it is important for local school leaders to identify and work with school attentives and that scholars should seek to better understand the sources and patterns of attentiveness to local schools.

1. PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR EDUCATIONAL SPENDING

Of all of the serious problems facing public education today, the uncertain support for the public for educational spending is one of the most critical. Most often, this issue emerges when local school authorities must seek voter approval for an increase in tax rates for operating support or -- less often -- for the construction or renovation of additional facilities. A substantial number of school referenda continue to be defeated throughout the nation.

The purpose of this paper is to outline a multivariate model of some of the major factors often thought to account for differences in attitudes toward educational spending and to examine the predictive power of that model. This analysis reflects some initial work on a continuing project to better understand the structure of public attitudes toward schools generally and toward educational spending more specifically.

2. A 1984 SURVEY OF ILLINOIS RESIDENTS

The analysis will use a survey of Illinois residents conducted in the spring of 1984. Sponsored by the Center for Governmental Studies[1] at Northern Illinois University as a part of its program of assistance to the Illinois Legislature,

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[1] The author gratefully acknowledges the permission of Dr. Douglas Dobson, Director of the Center for Governmental Studies, for the use of these data. Were it not for the leadership of Professor Dobson in seeking university and legislative support for this survey, the data could not have been collected and the analysis described in this paper could not have been conducted.

the 1984 study utilized the Public Opinion Laboratory's probability sample of the state of Illinois. One thousand interviews of about 20 minutes each were conducted by telephone from the Northern Illinois University Public Opinion Laboratory in DeKalb. The survey included a wide range of items relevant to state government in Illinois, including a battery of items concerning the quality and funding of local schools. A completion rate of approximately 80 per cent was obtained. The field work was completed during April of 1984.

3. A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The purpose of this analysis is to better understand public attitudes toward education spending for local public schools. While there are a number of methods available to measure this attitude, the 1984 Illinois survey used a direct inquiry approach, asking each respondent whether the level of spending for local schools was too high, too low, or about right. The interview included several similar items concerning the level of governmental spending for other state and local programs, thus the respondent was reasonably familiar with the evaluative intent of the question.

For the purpose of this analysis, the spending question has been dichotomized into those respondents who felt that too little was being spent on local school and those who were either satisfied with the current level or felt that it was too high. In practical terms, most school financing issues -- especially referenda -- focus on efforts to increase spending

for schools, thus it is perhaps most useful to try to understand which segments of the population would be most receptive to increased spending for educational purposes. In 1984, 39 per cent of Illinois residents felt that too little was being spent on local schools.

To better understand the distribution of these attitudes, this analysis will examine some of the major hypotheses from the literature and others prominent in conventional wisdom. It is important to note that this work is only one part of a larger research project concerning a wide range of attitudes toward local schools. While a large number of variables are being used -- primarily from national data sets -- the opportunity to explore attitudes toward spending for local schools is an important one.

The dominant hypothesis in the field in recent years has been that parents with children in the public schools are the major supporters of public education and that their numbers are decreasing. In imagery reminiscent of the last troop of soldiers at the Alamo, we are reminded that parenthood appears to be less attractive to new cohorts entering the adult population and that spending for the public schools is a special interest pleading. In reality, it is unlikely that parents are as supportive or that non-parents are as negative as this image would suppose. In this analysis, each respondent has been classified as to whether or not they had children in a public elementary or secondary school at the time of the 1984

interview. Approximately 29 per cent of the respondents in the study had children enrolled in a public school.

A second hypothesis concerns the impact of income on attitudes toward school spending. Several studies in the referenda literature have found that low income voters are less favorable toward tax increases for schools than are higher income groups. Among practitioners, it is conventional wisdom not to seek a rate increase during periods of economic downturn or difficulty. Respondents were asked their family income and, for the purposes of this analysis, the responses were grouped into those with family incomes under $15,000; those with family incomes between $15,000 and $30,000; and those persons with family incomes over $30,000. About 28 per cent of Illinois residents fell into the lower income group and approximately 36 were in the upper income classification.

A third proposition is that suburban and non-metropolitan residents are satisfied with their schools and that discontent is focused primarily on central city school systems. Illinois provides an excellent arena in which to test that hypothesis. The Chicago Board of Education has had all of the problems common to large city systems. The suburban Chicago school systems include a wide range of schools, from nationally acclaimed to problem-ridden. And downstate Illinois schools reflect a mix of rural, small town, and middle-sized city systems. For this analysis, respondents were classified as Chicago residents (27 per cent), suburban Chicago residents (35 per cent), or downstate residents (38 per cent).

Finally, Miller (1983) and Leatham (1985) have utilized a stratified model first proposed by Almond (1950) to identify an "attentive public for local schools." Miller and Leatham have argued that this attentive public, which includes those citizens who have a high level of self-reported interest in local school issues and who believe themselves to be very well informed about school issues, is significantly more supportive of schools than other citizens. Presumably, this positive attitude toward schools should extend to education spending. To test that proposition, each respondent was classified as attentive to local school issues or not. Approximately 26 per cent of Illinois residents qualified as attentive to local school issues, a result that is almost identical to national results.

There are numerous additional hypotheses that are being explored with these same data in other analyses. It is hoped that this set of propositions tap some of the mainstreams of current thinking in the field and that the methods employed here will stimulate the development of additional multivariate analyses by other researchers.

4. A MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

To understand the relationship of each of these four variables to the spending attitude and to identify the structure among these variables, we will (1) examine the multivariate distribution of attitudes toward educational spending, (2)

construct a path model to examine the structure of these relationships, and (3) perform a logit analysis to determine the relative strength of each of the direct paths to -- or associations with -- the spending attitude. In the final section of this analysis, we will explore the implications of these results for communications with the public in regard to educational spending issues.

An examination of the multivariate distribution of attitudes toward school spending indicates that persons who are attentive to local schools are more likely to see educational funding as too low than non-attentive citizens in almost every demographic classification. Parents are often -- but not always -- more supportive than non-parents. High income parents were significantly more supportive than other groups, except in the city of Chicago.

To better understand the structure of these relationships, it is helpful to construct a path analysis of these variables. Using the methods described by Goodman (1972a, 1972b) and Fienberg (1977), a path analysis was performed, using the same data shown in Table 1. The results are displayed in Figure 1. The solid lines indicate direct associations with the spending attitude and the broken lines indicate associations among variables other than the spending attitude.

The analysis found that attentiveness to local school issues and residential location were directly related to the spending attitude, but that having a child in school and the

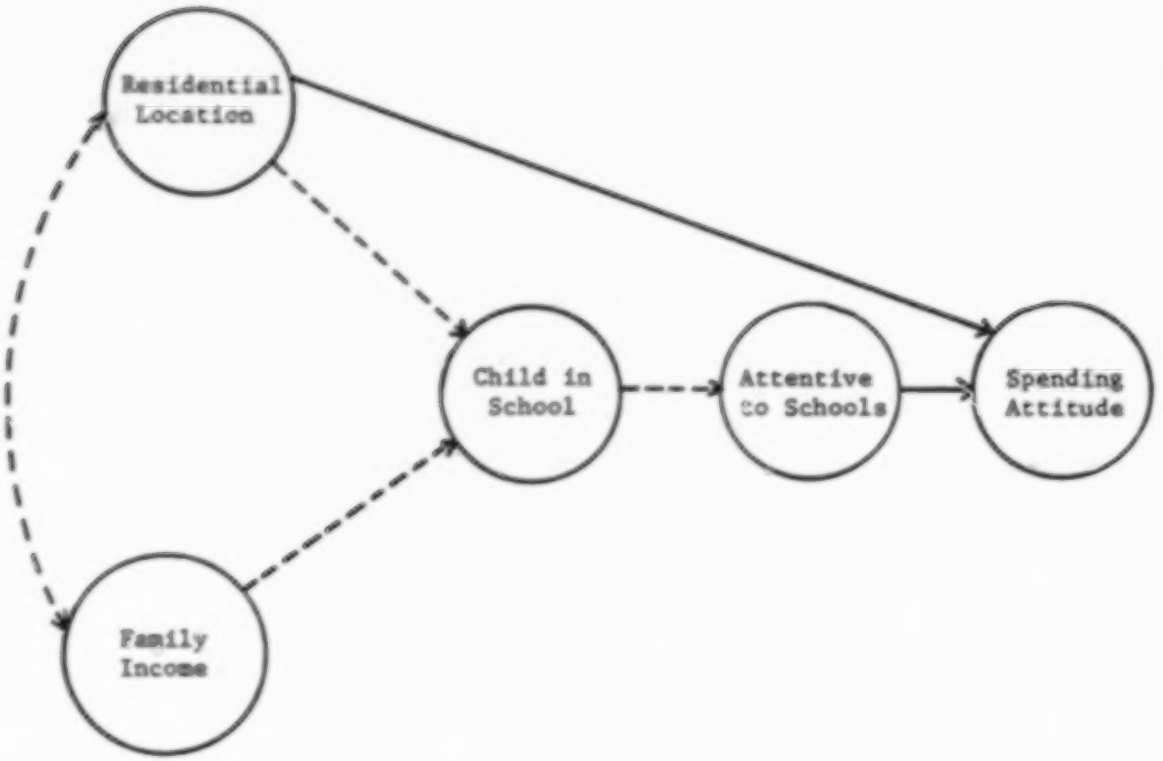
TABLE 1

Distribution of Attitudes toward School Spending

INCOME	CHILD IN PUB. SCH.	ATTENTIVE TO SCHOOLS	"school funding too low" CHICAGO	SUBURBS	DOWNSTATE
Low	No	Not	38%(61)	24%(42)	29%(62)
		Attn	50%(10)	**(4)	50%(12)
	Yes	Not	36%(14)	**(4)	38%(16)
		Attn	60%(10)	**(3)	50%(14)
Middle	No	Not	53%(62)	34%(65)	33%(66)
		Attn	80%(10)	29%(14)	57%(21)
	Yes	Not	**(7)	40%(15)	29%(35)
		Attn	**(5)	27%(11)	57%(23)
High	No	Not	30%(50)	31%(91)	34%(35)
		Attn	73%(11)	47%(17)	40%(10)
	Yes	Not	**(1)	24%(29)	38%(21)
		Attn	**(5)	56%(27)	74%(27)

** = cell too small to report percentages.

Figure 1: A Path Model to Predict Attitude toward School Spending



level of family income were not directly related to this attitude (See Figure 1). Higher-income families and downstate residents were significantly more likely to have a child in a public school. Having a child in a public school was directly related to attentiveness.

Given the intervening role apparently played by attentiveness to local school issues, it is useful to examine the relative influence of both being a public school parent and residential location in the development of attentiveness. For this purpose, a logit analysis[2] was employed. The results indicated that having a child in the public schools was the strongest predictor of attentiveness, accounting for 75 per cent of the total mutual dependence[3] in the analysis. Differences in residential location and family income were not associated with attentiveness at the .01 level.

Returning to the path analysis, the results show that only attentiveness to local school issues and residential location were directly associated with -- or predictive of -- an individual's attitude toward school spending (see Figure 1).

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[2] A logit analysis utilizes a multivariate categorical distribution, like that shown in Table 1, and makes regression-like estimates of the strength of each of the main effects. The logit analysis is also very helpful in identifying interaction terms. For a more detailed discussion, see Goodman (1972a, 1972b) and Feinberg (1977).

[3] Mutual dependence is a term suggested by Goodman (1972a, 1972b) and is analogous to variance in interval data sets. Since categorical variables not related to each other are said to be independent, the association between categorical variables is called mutual dependence. For an extended discussion of this concept, see Goodman (1978).

Using the same logit procedures described above, it is possible to determine the relative strength of each of these direct paths. The logit analysis indicated that attentiveness to local school issues accounted for 29 per cent of the total mutual dependence in the analysis, with attentives being significantly more likely to think that too little is being spent on local schools (see Table 2). Residential location accounted for an additional 18 per cent of the mutual dependence, with Chicago residents being the most likely to express the view that current school spending was too low and suburban residents being the least likely to express that sentiment.

TABLE 2

A Logit Analysis of Attiudes toward School Spending

MODEL		CMPD*
H1	Unique effect of attentiveness to schools.	.288
H2	Unique effect of residential location.	.180
H3	Unique effect of location-income interaction.	.144

* Coefficient of Multiple-Partial Determination.

In addition to the two direct effects just described, the logit analysis identified a significant interaction term. An interaction indicates that either the direction or magnitude of one independent variable varies significantly within classes of another independent variable. In this case, the logit

analysis found a significant interaction between residential location and income in the prediction of the attitude toward school spending. In substantive terms, the analysis found that middle-income residents of Chicago and upper-income residents of downstate areas were the groups most likely to express the view that too little was being spent on local schools, while higher-income residents in Chicago were the least likely group to hold that view. This interaction accounted for about 14 per cent of the total mutual dependence in the analysis.

In summary, the multivariate analysis has shown that attentiveness to local school issues is the strongest predictor of the view that school spending is too low. Chicago residents were more likely to see school spending as too low than other Illinois residents, and suburban Chicago residents were least likely to express that view. Higher-income residents of Chicago were among the least likely groups of have children in the public schools and were relatively less likely to see school spending as too low.

5. CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions can we draw from this analysis? Let me suggest three.

First, this analysis argues strongly that it is attentiveness to local school issues and direct utilization of the public schools that predicts most strongly to a positive atti-

tude toward school spending. While 47 per cent of respondents with a child in the public schools were attentive to local school issues, the majority of school parents were not attentive. In contrast, 17 per cent of Illinois residents who do not have children in a public school were attentive to school issues. The logit analysis showed that it is attentiveness rather than the use of a public school that is most strongly associated with the spending attitude.

Second, the results indicate that suburban residents are significantly less likely to see their schools as underfunded than other Illinois residents. Given the differences in local tax rates and actual school expenditures, this may be a correct perception on the part of suburban residents. This attitude should not be viewed as a lack of support for their local schools, but rather a judgment of the relative financial need of those schools.

Third, these results suggest that the impact of family income on the spending attitude differs significantly by geographic area. In Chicago, middle-income respondents were significantly more likely to be concerned about the level of school spending than any other groups, while middle-income respondents in the downstate areas were among the least concerned about school spending. Easy generalizations about the effect of income on spending attitudes should be avoided, and care should be taken to set income effects within a context.

Given these conclusions what are the implications for school boards, school administrators, and further research. These results should suggest to school boards and administrators that it is important to identify, cultivate, and eventually mobilize the attentive public for local school issues. Since a majority of current public school parents are not attentive, it would also seem prudent to seek to increase interest among parents in school affairs and to seek to increase the information flow to this group.

The results also point to interesting issues for further analysis. Given the central role played by the attentive public for local schools, it is important to better understand the factors that stimulate individuals to develop a high level of interest in school matters and to acquire a sense of being well informed about school issues. The work of Leatham in this area is important and should be expanded.

Since the Illinois data set includes spending attitude measures for several other areas of government, it is important to extend this analysis to better understand the relative position of education spending in the public's mind. During periods of financial restraint at all levels of government, the completion of a fixed or declining pool of resources will put education in direct competition with other spending objectives. It will be important to examine the relative priorities assigned educational spending. And, to the extent that attentive publics for other sectors can be identified in these data, it will be important to understand the role of conflict-

ing and over-lapping attentive publics in the competion for public resources.

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